

The plight of European women scientists



A picture of learning

BUDGET FINALE

NIH Gets \$17.9 Billion In Another Record Year

In an encore performance that is drawing rave reviews from biomedical researchers, Congress handed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) another record budget increase. The \$17.9 billion budget passed by the House on 18 November and the next day in the Senate represents a \$2.3 billion boost that matches last year's precedent-setting 14.7% raise.

The 2000 NIH budget is part of a last-minute agreement to wrap \$385 billion in government spending into one appropriations bill so that Congress can recess for the year. And the only sour note in that package, which

savoring a year that began with a White House request for just a 3% increase. "There is a tremendous amount of good news in this budget—it lifts all boats," said Mike Stephens, lead lobbyist for the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), which represents more than 66,000 researchers.

NIH director Harold Varmus said he was "thrilled" with the budget, which provides NIH's 16 institutes with increases ranging from 13.4% to 15.1%. The National Cancer Institute—NIH's biggest research funder—will get a 14.8% boost to \$3.3 billion, while spending at the second-ranked National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute will grow 14.5%, to \$2 billion. Several smaller programs were also big winners, with human genome research getting a 25.4% lift, to \$337 million, and the controversial center for alternative medicine winning a 37.5% increase, to \$69 million. Officials expect a rise in the number of grants to individual investigators and a jump-start for several initiatives, including gene sequencing and biocomputing projects (*Science*, 11 June, p. 1742). "We plan to do a lot of things that we've been holding in our back pocket," Varmus told *Science*.

In what one House aide called "a last-minute minor miracle," lawmakers also shrank a plan that would have required NIH to push \$7.5 billion in spending into the next fiscal year. Several research groups and White House officials earlier this month had denounced the budget gimmick—designed to protect Social Security accounts—saying it would disrupt research by delaying funding of new and renewed grants. But Varmus, worried about jeopardizing the agency's overall increase, had signaled that NIH could live with as much as \$4 billion in delayed spending, and budget negotiators seemed ready to move ahead with that number. As weary House budgeteers prepared the final package, however, NIH backers—including Representatives John Porter (R-IL) and David Obey

(D-WI)—convinced colleagues to reduce the deferred spending to just \$3 billion. "We agreed [that the delayed spending] had to come down to reduce potential disruptions," Porter told *Science*.

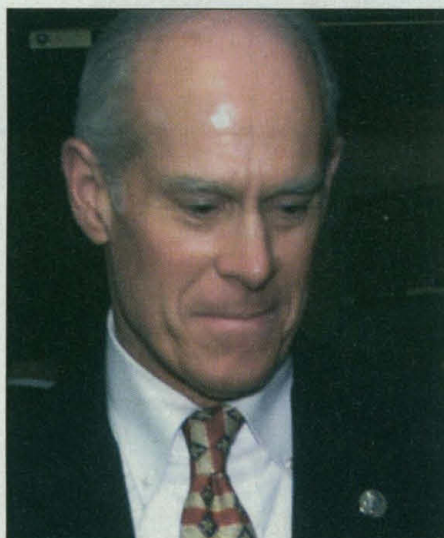
Exactly how NIH officials will spend the new funds remains to be seen. And it could be another month or more before NIH knows whether it will be affected by the across-the-board cut—estimated to save just \$1.5 billion from the entire federal budget—that Republican leaders insisted upon in the final round of negotiations. Clinton Administration officials will be able to pick where to make the cuts but can't slash particular programs by more than 15%. Although NIH will probably lose some money, Varmus said cuts were "unlikely

to create any particular difficulties. No one is feeling unhappy about this."

Another decision that NIH officials face is how much of the new money to commit to multiyear grants. Tying up too much money in long-term awards could reduce the funds available for new grants if Congress holds down increases in future years, observers note.

NIH allies, however, are already discussing how to keep the agency on the doubling path. Whereas some see this year's outcome as adding momentum to the doubling train, others wonder if this year's bruising political battle—which included lawmakers such as Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM) expressing concern that the agency won't be able to spend its growing budget properly—may have torn up the tracks. "Some toes got stepped on this year in pushing the increase," says one congressional aide, noting that several Republican leaders were unhappy that some biomedical groups joined the White House in attacking the delayed budgeting concept.

But Porter, who is retiring next year after 22 years in Congress, says that he and other "supporters of biomedical research have long realized that [doubling] is a very difficult goal." Next year, he notes, NIH will need another huge increase—\$2.7 billion—to keep up the pace. A continued strong economy would help, he says, and might dampen complaints. "There is so much good science out there," he adds, that any new funds can be "extremely well spent." —DAVID MALAKOFF



Biomedical booster. Representative John Porter successfully pushed hard for another big NIH increase.

covers nine departments, is a 0.38% cut in total government spending, which White House officials must now spread across many programs, including NIH's parent body, the Department of Health and Human Services.

The increase for NIH marks another success for a high-profile campaign aimed at doubling NIH's budget by 2004. But lobbyists worry that the big win may add to concerns that the agency is growing too fast and make lawmakers tighten the fiscal spigot next year. For the moment, however, research groups are

